

Testimony Judicial Legislation May 6, 09

Thank you for this opportunity to speak on behalf of Juvenile Legislation.

My name is Julie Keefer. I am an educator with twenty years experience working with adolescents and young adults.

For the past 27 years I have directed the retreat and spiritual life center I founded where I have worked with adults seeking to learn, heal and grow from the wounding and trauma accumulated over the course of their lives.

I am advocating for this juvenile legislation because of my understanding of the young and wounded part of our humanity, recognizing how often children are taken for granted and seen as objects to be manipulated and controlled, as opposed to being seen as vulnerable, sensitive souls needing nurture, acceptance, guidance and unconditional love in order to develop their one unique life in God. Children and adolescents at any age need to be seen, heard, accepted, loved and given safe boundaries in which to unfold their lives until they have sufficient inner and outer resources to create a life of personal meaning and integrity by which they can flourish and add value to the lives of others just by being who they are and doing what they love.

When the essence of a person is violated and not respected in vital ways, no matter at what age, they can become traumatized, which affects their mental and emotional security, confidence, and thus sense of self.

Human Beings develop internal and external defenses to cope with feelings of vulnerability as a result of trauma, minor or severe. Yes, we all do. These defenses help us cope until we feel safe and skilled enough to trust our self-responsibility for living creative, constructive lives.

These defenses can also become self-destructive if the trauma is severe and a sense of safety, skill and help needed is missing to process the pain. The destruction can take the form of blaming the self for the trauma and the internalization of the pain which is manifested in addictive behavior to numb the pain. Food, alcohol, drugs, consumerism, sexual acting out, compliance or resistance to external authority or through self-hatred projected outward as rage directed toward others through violent, destructive acts. These are ways the wounded child or adolescent may respond when feeling threatened and vulnerable. The hurting child irrationally seeks to defend her or himself from experiencing more suffering and pain, physically and emotionally if help is not sought or given. Defendedness against pain may be healed over time and the human heart find it's reason for being and make an authentic contribution to life if given a chance to be seen, heard, valued and empowered to do so.

The research on adolescent brain development indicates that it isn't until into the 20's or beyond that a person can discern more clearly the cause and effect consequences of his or her choices. Yet, our state has put such youth in prison for life without parole not

taking into account their psychic wounding, immaturity, or inexperience. This is an issue of juvenile injustice and a systemic betrayal of our most emotionally vulnerable children. Life without parole essentially amounts to their entire adult life and death behind bars. This seems outrageous and cruel.

Currently, there are approximately 300 people in Michigan prisons sentenced to life without parole. These persons, some of whom have been in prison for 20, 30 or more years, have had much time to choose to come to terms with the irrational acts committed as juveniles and grow into mature people making positive contributions to the lives of others.

I personally know one such person. Karl Strunk has been incarcerated for 23 years since committing his crime as a juvenile when he received a life sentence without parole. I have been corresponding with Karl, since 2005 when he initiated it. I knew him as a teen. I have been deeply impressed with this man's capacity to turn his life around and be determined to make something of himself though having no reason to expect ever outside the confines of prison. He has consistently taken responsibility for his actions and expressed remorse and suffering for the suffering he caused. He has taken initiative to learn and to create a life of meaning for himself and in service to others.

As a juvenile, Karl experienced a traumatic event which escalated into confusion, shame, fear and compensatory, acting out behaviors eventually leading to the crime he was sentenced for. Juveniles should be held accountable for their violent crimes, but be given in a manner that gives their physiological, psychological and emotional capabilities full consideration in the circumstances surrounding the crime. The option of parole must be given, so that people, like Karl Strunk, who have worked hard to rehabilitate their lives can have a second chance.

This legislation gives our state an opportunity to exercise moral courage and heartfelt compassion on behalf of the wounded child which resides, to some degree, within all of us. Let's not make these juvenile offenders our scapegoats. They deserve compassion and justice.

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